

## "critic's view – *The Archive Project*"

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Text of a review of *The Archive Project* by Natalie Craig, first Published in *The Age 'Green Guide'* pg 30 Thursday 18 January, 2007.

Comrades of Australian Cinema unite!

This documentary about a group of socialist filmmakers in Melbourne during the Cold War unearths a forgotten era in Australian film history. It has obvious appeal for film buffs but it is also compulsory viewing for anyone concerned about threats to political freedom in Australia under the new sedition laws.

The Melbourne Realist Film Unit was loosely associated with the Australian Communist Party and created films including *Prices For The People* and *A Glimpse of New China*. It wanted to spur political action by showing what life was like for the working classes after World War II. "This inequality must end," urges the film *A Place To Live*, about Melbourne's housing shortage. "The workers must own the wealth they produce." But the Melbourne Realists were not fundamentalists and became increasingly sceptical about Stalin's cult of personality. The group believed first and foremost in the film's potential for social change.

The term 'realist' can be difficult: the Melbourne group was interested specifically in *social* realism. Following the example of Russian filmmaker Sergei Eisenstein, their films did not mimic life but attempted to show "what the world didn't see" through montage – or the juxtaposition of images. A shot of a worker digging a hole is set against an image of piles of money: the workers are being exploited. Images of striking workers being attacked are followed by shots of a bull being slaughtered: the workers are being treated like cattle.

For some in the group, the Russian Revolution was a beacon of hope but for most the Australian Communist Party was appealing simply because it took a strong lead on post-war problems of poverty, housing and unemployment. While the film group was never an ACP mouthpiece, it came under intense scrutiny by the newly created ASIO, and was one of the many organizations threatened by the Communists Party dissolution bill.

Melbourne Realist Elizabeth Coldicutt recalled that at any given meeting of the group of about 10 people "you could expect someone to be watching". As Cold War intensified, the threat of another war – this time an atomic one – prompted an international youth peace movement.

The group's last film, *They Choose Peace*, documents the Youth Carnival for Peace and Friendship held in Sydney in 1952. The government tried to stifle the carnival by thwarting venue agreements and denying visas to all overseas delegates, except the New Zealanders. Ironically, it was the government's over-reaction that made the carnival successful. As organiser Audrey Blake says: "*They* made it big." Salient words given the present climate of political paranoia.

This is a powerful, relevant and original documentary – the product of serious detective work in the archives of Australian film.